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ABSTRACT

Too often African American students in communication courses are confronted with communication principles which to them seem inappropriate, unrealistic, and simply false. Current conceptualizations of organizational communication suggest that the organization consists of one culture (often depicted as predominantly white and predominantly male). Yet demographics indicate a changing work force consisting of fewer white males (one projection suggests only 15% by the year 2000) and more women and minorities. With the influx of new faces come new cultures. Instructors of organizational communication must address the issue of multiculturalism as they prepare students for the transition to a rapidly evolving workplace, one in which organizational life is no longer dominated by a single set of cultural norms. Organizational communication should be presented in a manner which is open to the possibility of many cultures rather than one culture and which considers the possibility that different organizational members function within different organizational environments. This goal may be accomplished by making explicit the assumptions made as reality is constructed through the process of organizational communication. It should be understood that this process goes on in different ways in different places throughout the organization. Students must be nurtured to understand that Black students, Asian students, Hispanic students, and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant students must evaluate communication "skill" in the context of their own and other cultural beliefs, attitudes, and value systems--otherwise their communication will be ineffective. (Twenty references are attached. An appendix contains a model for designing culturally sensitive communication courses.) (SR)

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Organizational Multiculturalism:
Towards a Model of Diversity Sensitivity in the Teaching of
Organizational Communication

A paper

presented by Anita Foeman, Ph.D.

at the convention of the
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Abstract

This work examines modern conceptualizations of organizational communication and argues for a more diversity-minded orientation. The author considers samples of recent publications related to the teaching of organizational communication examining them in relation to their sensitivity to the cross cultural nature of modern organizations. A new multicultural model of examination of organizational communication is called for.

In the past Organizational Communication educators examined organizational communication based on outcomes which were attainable through the use of verbal and nonverbal contact (see Goldhaber 1983, for example.) In more recent years, theorists such as Pacanowski and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) have presented a cultural model of organizations. These authors argue that organizations are, in fact, cultures, and examination of organizational communication can focus on the process of organizing as well as the outcomes of organization.

While this insight provides a major breakthrough in our understanding of organizational process, a tacit assumption tends to persist which continues to suggest a monolithic structure of organizational life. The assumption is that the organization consists of one culture (often depicted as a predominantly white, predominantly male culture.) Convergent groups within the organization are presumed to be subsumed neatly under the rubric of the larger organization. The motivation for integrating is the social constraints placed on the individual by coworkers and the organizational system of sanctions. Much of the coherence to traditional organizational rules is based on the desire on the part of the individual to be a part of the "web of significance" (Geertz, 1973 pp. 5 as cited by Pacanowski and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982) spun by organizational decision makers.

Belief in a monolithic culture allows one (perhaps causes one) to

comfortably talk about, culture as "the sum total of the organizational agreement of all the groups ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (Brown, 1963, pp.3-4) or "the generic aspects of organizational understanding" (Pacanowski and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, pp. 124) or "society-wide characteristics" (Kreps, 1986, 135). Each of these implies some level of accross the board agreement as to cultural norms.

Kreps (1986) does address the concept of subcultures (pp. 136) in his Organizational Communication text, however his discussion adds energy to the "one culture" perspective in that it implies that "sub" cultures give way to "mainstream" most of the time. The problem with this characterization of organizational communication is that today the very face and nature of interaction within the modern organization is changing and being challenged. In ways never before seen "subcultures" (of particular concern here Black American culture) are demanding equal say in the construction of organizational reality. As a result, many cultures grapple and compete for control over overall organizational perceptions. Thus, cultures coexist side by side, albeit sometimes unbeknownst to one another.

The signs of the shift in cultural orientation are all around. For example, literature discussing the participation of Black Americans (and other groups) in American culture is more and more often referred to as "cross-cultural," "diversity" or pluralism"

research (Gollnick, 1986, Lynch, 1986, Banks, 1985 for example) rather than research on "integration," "minority group participation" or "assimilation" (see, for example Gordon, 1963 and Fernandez, 1975). This implies a more equal status on the part of a variety of groups in setting cultural standards. Also, on September of this year CSpan televised nationally debates addressing the issue of how African Americans wished to be identified (a debate conducted by "Black" Americans) Again, the implication is that Black Americans may now demand self determination on par with their white (and other ethnic) counterparts. Finally, the fact that today, most large modern organization in America include some type of Black support and/or consciousness-raising organization (either within their walls or across the profession) is also a key indicator in the shift from a "sub" culture orientation to a cross cultural one.

There has long been support for the idea that Black Americans existed within a culture which was different and isolated from that of White (and other) American groups (see Johnson, 1971; Smitherman, and Kochman). The difference is that today this culture competes for organizational power and attention with the formal structure of organizational culture. This significantly has changed the nature of organizational communication.

Unless the student of organizational communication is aware that different and competing interpretations of the organizational

life are at operating, the student is likely to enter the organizational world looking for a singular organizational life when there is none. Demographics alone belie such an impression.

Workforce 2000

Griggs, 1987, offers that the workforce of the year 2000 will look considerably different than the work world for which many students of organizational communication are now being geared. The trends are already in place. In 1970 the work force was "maned" primarily by white, native born American men. In 1985 this group represented only 47% of the work force. In the year 2000 it is projected that that number will be closer to 15% (Griggs, 1987.) In their place women and minorities (particularly Blacks and Hispanics) will likely play a major role. With the influx of new faces comes new cultures. While women certainly represent a significant stylistic shift from the traditional male model, it is the influx of different racial groups (due to their greater isolation from contact with the traditional White male culture, (see Foeman, 1987) which will require that the organization adapt to perhaps more unfamiliar models of organizational communication. Students of organizational communication must be prepared to identify and assist with these shifts and changes in the multicultural work world.

While considerable writing has addressed the issue of multicultural education (see Banks, 1988; Oakes, 1985; Ovando and Collier, 1985; Katz 1975 and others) little of the multicultural orientation has been addressed directly in terms of the Organizational Communication curriculum in our field. Over the past decade COMMUNICATION EDUCATION journal has published no articles which address the issue of ethnicity as it relates to the teaching of Organizational Communication. Five articles relevant to the teaching of Organizational Communication do appear (Mier, 1982; Pace and Foss, 1983; Alderton, 1983; Boileau; Kreps and Leiderman, 1985; and Stanley and Shockley-Kalabak, 1985).

For the most part issues of race and culture are left to courses entitled "Interracial" or "Intercultural" Communication (see, for example, Valentine and Valentine, 1983 or Leonard and Locke, 1980). While Broome (1986) comments on the difficulty of addressing cultural issues without benefit of context, other professionals in our field do not seem to have view culture as an intergral part of various communication teaching contexts. I would like to examine two most recent Organizational Communication publications in COMMUNICATION EDUCATION to consider the relevance of race and culture to their content.

The Kreps/Leiderman use of case study.

In 1985 Kreps and Leiderman argued for the use of the case study as "a technique for examining realistic organizational problems" (pp. 358) which "mirror reality" (pp. 359). The authors argue for a three part analytic approach which includes 1) problem identification, 2) problem analysis, and 3) recommendations. They also present an expanded discussion of the role of "debriefing" and they discuss "the instructor's role [as] guide [to] the discussion and interpretation of the case" (pp. 361).

While these steps and suggestions are generally appropriate and important, this author would argue that cultural acuity make it important to explicitly add an additional component. Such an addition would require that the evaluators consider the process by which recommendations are made. In such a step the instructor can point out the limitations inherent in any single "solution" and the inherent unreality, devoid of context which is a weakness inherent to most case study situations (Pat).

The goal of this final component would be to make explicit the many assumptions which are made in the process of solution finding, and to make students specifically aware of the cultural assumptions we all bring in solving organizational problems. This realization is imperative. Let me provide an example from my own classroom experience.

A student manager is faced with an employee who has many

financial and family pressures weighing on him. Still, the worker has been a loyal and effective employee over the past ten years. After considerable thought the student manager suggests both financial and personal counseling for the employee (both confidential, both covered by the organization's Employee Assistance Plan) and a flexible work schedule which allows the employee to meet home and work demands. Everyone is satisfied.

But suppose the subordinate is a White man and the manager a Black man. Is the student aware that the stakes of such a suggestion may be quite high when interactants are from different racial groups? Is the student aware that many Black Americans (particularly men) are uncomfortable making (or accepting) direct inquiries into personal life? --Or suppose the subordinate is of Asian decent. Is the student aware that many individuals of Asian decent may find the idea of therapy showy and self-centered and, additionally, a cultural constraint may inhibit the employee from expressing such a discomfort with this type of solution.

While, at one time, these types of cultural issues had to be identified only in the context of the "cross-cultural case study," almost every manager today can expect that a significant number of his or her real life "cases" will include a cross cultural component. Our solutions to human conflicts are always based in an array of assumptions about another individual's culture and belief system. In the example presented above these

might include beliefs concerning individual's attitudes toward "talk therapy," (and talking as a problem-solving devise altogether), toward sharing personal concerns with outsiders or strangers, toward mixing work life with private life and any number of other cultural standards. Thus, while the therapy solution may work beautifully for some employees, it may be a disaster in other cases. And whatever the problem, these types of cultural issues weave their way through the situation and must be analyzed as an inherent step in recommendation making, for these solutions help to determine which perceptions of the workplace will rule the day. Such struggles are the stuff of which organizational culture clash are made.

A component which requires us to examine the frameworks from which we make decisions is complex, but no more complex than the multifaced communication contexts into which we send our students who identify as "communication majors." The contexts in which they will find themselves are not singular, but multi layered pitting one construction of the world against another. The contexts are based on perspectives and meta [even meta, meta] perspectives which press on the organizational communication environment and may in reality (though often washed over in the simulation or discussion situation) remain unresolvable unless made explicit.

We simply cannot continue to send communication majors into often

tense and racially charged organizational environments when they themselves feel uncomfortable with the word (let alone the implications of) race.

While the expanded eight step debriefing process offered by Kreps and Leiderman can allow for discussion of cultural issues, they are not inherently a part of the schema. This author believes that this is vital.

The Stanley and Shockley-Kalabak Organizational Communication Track.

Earlier in 1985, Stanley and Shockley-Kalabak examined communication competencies for an undergraduate Organizational Communication series. While the authors state that they "do not pretend that this series either identifies or develops all the communication competencies relevant to organizational life in the eighties and beyond" (pp. 156), not one of the skills addresses the issue of cross cultural sensitivity (with the possible exception of a concept identified as the student's ability to "identify how interpersonal communicational and organizational communication may differ," pp. 158.)

The authors argue for a series of courses covering a range of organizational communication issues. Interestingly, the

materials the authors select are based on a set of concerns which local business people verify as salient.

I am often concerned that our organizational communication curricula are becoming technical training for students whose goals it is to get a job in the most expedious manner. And my first concern with the Stanley and Shockley-Kalabak program is that it supports such an orientation. I am not sure that professors of Organizational Communication want their courses designed by John Nesbit, Peters and Waterman and local businessmen, albeit they are successful in their fields. We may instead want to spend time distinguishing what it is that we do in Organizational Communication which is unique and different from other organizational analysts and participants.

It is my hope that, as communication professionals, we can add insight to the movements which will need to occur in the organization of the future. It is my hope that we are willing to take great pains to understand the organizaztion's deepest values and styles. These values and styles may evade the awareness of many organizational participants. Our goal hopefully, is to assist our students to understand the nature of the jobs they will hold. As critical analysis and consumers of the organizational culture, they need to be aware of cultural nuances, inconsistencies and contradictions with which they will be faced. They model presented does not make any such demand.

While "a section of the advanced course is devoted to the subject of organizational culture" (pp. 160); there is no indication that the student will understand that organizational culture is an ongoing and all pervasive factor in organizational life, that culture is multidimensional, often not agreed upon, and that a unit on it contradicts its very idea (in much the same way that a Black History month contradicts the reality that Black American history is not an issue to be relegated to thirty days of the curricular year.)

Yet, the "blame" is not on any particular writer or theorist, we as a field must challenge the accepted parameters of organizational communication and redefine our issues on our own terms. We must develop new ways of dealing with the idea that communication skills and competencies are not devoid of context and multi culture and that we must have a more holistic and diversity encompassing model within which we can discuss the propriety and ethical implications of employing certain skills.

Our students must be nurtured to understand that Black students, and Asian students, and Hispanic students and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant students must evaluate communication "skill" in the context of their own and other's cultural belief, attitude and value systems. Otherwise their communication will be ineffective.

As we wait for our own models, I am encouraged by the insight which popular writer James Fallows (1989) MORE LIKE US in which he spends considerable space examining cultural similarities and differences between Eastern and Western conceptualizations of culture and work. His basic premise is that Americans must learn to better "to do the things America does best" (pp. 12). In large part that "thing" involves the ability to meaningfully process diversity.

As instructors of organizational communication, the issue of multiculturalism must be addressed as we prepare students to transition in to a rapidly evolving workplace. This paper argues for the presentation of organizational communication which is open to the possibility of many cultures rather than one culture and considers the possibility that different organizational members function within different organizational environments. This goal may be accomplished by making explicit the assumptions we make as we construct reality through the process of organizational communication. We need to understand that this process goes on in different ways in different places throughout the organization.

In the future, one of our tasks will be to identify ways in which we can access the varying communication worlds coexisting within the organization. But that is a topic for another time. More

immediately, we face the task of educating our students to understand that organizational life is no longer predominated by a basically cogent set of cultural norms.

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THE MODEL

Each of the three papers presented this afternoon has taken a look at basic communication courses from an African American perspective. We have analyzed and criticized the courses as they currently exist. We would now like to offer some suggestions for change. In fact, we would like to offer a a model for designing culturally sensitive communication courses.

PHASE ONE ORIENTATION

Before entering a multicultural classroom, teachers should be aware of their orientation--way of understanding-- cultural differences. What we propose is that teachers start the process of developing culturally sensitive courses by placing themselves on a cultural continuum. Drawing on the work of James Banks (1988) that continuum would be anchored on the left by THE CULTURAL PLURALIST, on the right by THE ASSIMILATIONIST and the center position would be held by THE MULTICULTURALIST. Each of these positions represents a way of looking at the role of culture in the classroom. Listed below are what might be considered belief statements generated by teachers grounded in each of the positions.

> Cultural Pluralist Position--Ethnic groups possess unique characteristics and must band together and separate from the majority culture.
>
> Multiculturalist Position--A person has <u>both</u> ethnic attachments and a common national culture competing for allegiance.
>
> Assimilationist Position--Individuals of minority

groups must blend together into a common culture.

PHASE TWO ASSUMPTIONS

Once teachers have fixed their position on the cultural continuum, it now becomes necessary to identify the assumptions, or beliefs about what students should learn in the classroom, which logically follow from the orientation claimed.

> Cultural Pluralist Assumptions: Teachers should help students to function in their own culture and resist dominance and oppression from the majority culture.

> Multicultural Assumptions: Teachers should help students learn how to function effectively within shared cultures, ethnic cultures and other cultures, as appropriate.

> Assimilation Assumptions: Teachers should help students develop a commitment to the common national culture and its idealized goals.

Before the course takes final form it is important for teachers to make sure that their orientations are in fact consistent with the assumptions they take into the classroom. Imagine students confusion when a teacher claims to be a cultural pluralist (either explicitly or implicitly) and then structures a course in which the dominant culture's method of behavior is the only suitable method of behaving in class. Consistency between teacher's orientation and operating assumptions helps add clarity to the whole array of classroom interactions.

PHASE THREE PARTICULARIZE

At this point in the model teachers mold the content of the course to the orientation and assumptions identified. In other

words, teachers in each of the positions take the course at hand (ie. public speaking, interpersonal, organizational), look at their assumptions and try to figure out how the specific material in that subject area can help accomplish the teacher's assumed goals.

PHASE FOUR EVALUATION

The final phase of the model calls upon teachers to figure out how to assess the success or failure of students given the orientation, the assumptions and the specific course content taught. Teachers must clearly establish their priorities here. Once again, we believe that classroom success will be facilitated if the teacher is consistent. Nothing drives students more crazy than if a teachers grading policies are inconsistent with what has occurred previously in the class.

Referring once again to the continuum previously described, we see the following as most probable:

> Cultural Pluralism Evaluation: 100% of the grading criteria would be based ethnic learning.
>
> Multicultural Evaluation: This would need to be a sliding scale. The teacher would need to fix a percentage of the grading criteria for learning the privileged or dominant culture model. Another fixed percentage of the grading criteria would be given for adaptive and/or ethnic learning.
>
> Assimilation Evaluation: 100% of the grading criteria would be based on the privileged or dominant culture model.

Evaluation does not stop with the students. Teacher need to evaluate themselves as well. Consequently, evaluation also

includes assessing the success or failure of the orientation, assumptions and specific content taught in order to revise the course and begin again.